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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 SINGAPORE 000312

SIPDIS

STATE FOR INR/B

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SN](#) [SOCI](#)

SUBJECT: MUSLIM MPS IN SINGAPORE: PART 1 OF 2

REF: A. 04 SINGAPORE 3001

[¶](#)B. 03 SINGAPORE 926

Classified By: Amb. Franklin L. Lavin, Reasons 1.4 (b)(d)

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: Concerned about preventing racial and religious conflict in Singapore, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) actively co-opts talented Muslims, especially potential critics. In addition to holding a modest number of senior positions in the government, representatives from Singapore's Muslim community have 12 seats in parliament, of whom one holds a ministerial portfolio. These MPs maintain close ties with community organizations and the grassroots, project a moderate image and condemn extremism, and defend unpopular government policies. Community leaders give them mixed reviews and Muslim MPs have been given charge only of lower profile ministries. The PAP has been recruiting more highly educated Muslim MPs and has taken several steps to raise their position in the cabinet. Starting in para 8 are bios for five of the MPs. Septel will cover the remaining MPs. End Summary.

Guaranteed Representation

[¶](#)2. (C) There are 12 Muslim MPs in Singapore's parliament, elected in November 2001. All 12 are from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), which controls 82 out of 84 seats. Singapore's electoral system guarantees representation in parliament for Malays, Indians and other minorities. (Note: Singapore is approximately 77 percent ethnic Chinese, 14 percent Malay, and 7 percent Indian. End Note.) Singapore's electoral system for parliament is divided between nine Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) and 14 Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) which have either five or six members. Under the electoral law, each GRC must have at least one Malay, Indian or other minority MP. The PAP has justified the GRC system as a way to guarantee parliamentary representation for minorities, which it has done. However, the electoral system has also made it more difficult for opposition parties to win seats (Ref A).

Role of the MPs

[¶](#)3. (C) The Muslim MPs serve a number of functions for the ruling party. First, the MP positions are an important tool for the PAP to co-opt bright and talented Muslims, especially any potential critics. This was the case with businessman MP Ahmad Magad, who helped found a group that was critical of the PAP government and its Muslim MPs, but was later recruited by the PAP to run for parliament. Second, the MPs provide important constituent services, meeting with the public at weekly "Meet the MP" sessions, as do all MPs. In addition, these MPs also work with community organizations and grassroots leaders to uplift Singapore's Malay/Muslim minority, which lags behind the other races in education level and income. Four junior Muslim MPs are responsible for coordinating efforts in the four key areas identified by community leaders: youth, education, employment, and family development. Third, the MPs project a moderate image for Singapore's Muslim community. Following the 9/11 attacks and the detentions of Jemaah Islamiyah suspects in Singapore, Muslim MPs have been expected to take a clear stand against terrorism and lead the community in condemning Islamic extremism. Fourth, the Muslim MPs actively defend government policies that are unpopular in parts of the community, such as the 2002 ban on girls wearing the Islamic headscarf (tudung) in public schools. Finally, these MPs help the PAP project its desired image of Singapore as a multi-racial, multi-religious meritocracy, even though real political power is wielded by a small inner-circle of mostly ethnic Chinese.

[¶](#)4. (C) Community leaders give the MPs mixed reviews. While they are seen as hard-working and talented, the MPs are also considered agents of the government. The former president of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) Maurof bin Haji Salleh told emboffs that the MPs were constrained from aggressively promoting the interests of the Malay/Muslim community. This was due to electoral reasons -- they could not afford to antagonize the majority of ethnic Chinese voters in their districts -- as well as the PAP's firm line against any use of religion for political purposes.

15. (C) For the last fifteen years, every cabinet has had one Muslim Minister (or Acting Minister), either as Minister of Environment or Minister of Community Development, Youth, and Sports (MCDYS - the major source of government funding for community and ethnic groups). This minister has also doubled as Minister-in-Charge of Muslim affairs. Community members have noted the absence of Muslim MPs in more senior and sensitive ministries, Rashidah Abdul Rasip -- CEO of MENDAKI, the leading Malay/Muslim education self-help group linked to the government -- told emboffs. Aren't these MPs good enough for higher profile portfolios in the cabinet, she asked. In the last cabinet reshuffle in August 2004, the PAP made some modest moves to raise the profile of its Muslim MPs in the cabinet. For example, the Ministry of Environment was reorganized and renamed to include water resources, which has strategic importance for Singapore and is a sensitive issue in its relations with neighboring Malaysia. Also, while there is still only one Minister, there are now two Muslim Ministers of State, one each at MFA and in the Prime Minister's Office. There has also been speculation that the current Speaker of Parliament, Abdullah Tarmugi, could be selected the next president later this year.

The Modern MP

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16. (C) Muslim MPs are expected to serve as role models for the community. In recruiting new Muslim MPs, the PAP has increasingly sought candidates who are professionals like lawyers, doctors, and engineers with advanced degrees. In the past, Muslim MPs were not seen as well-qualified as their Chinese counterparts and were chosen for their grassroots ties, according to Rashidah.

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MP Biographies

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17. (U) These biographies are designed to be stand-alone documents, so acronyms and organizations are described in each biography.

Abdullah Tarmugi - Speaker of Parliament

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18. (U) Abdudllah Tarmugi has been an MP since 1984 and Speaker of Parliament since 2002. He has held a variety of cabinet posts, including Minister for Environment and for Community Development and Sports. He was also Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs from 1993-2002. He may be in line for the largely ceremonial position of president.

19. (C) Abdullah has had an uneasy relationship with the Malay community in Singapore. A private person, he has publicly expressed his discomfort with the additional scrutiny and higher expectations to which Malay/Muslim MPs are subjected. While he has stated that being a Malay helped him relate to the community's concerns, he has said that he must serve all his constituents and look at issues from a national perspective. Some Muslims have criticized him for not being religious enough and for the very "modern" style of his ethnic Chinese wife. He has firmly supported the government line in controversial issues, such as the 2002 decision to ban Muslim girls from wearing the tudung (Islamic headscarf) in national schools. As Chairman of MENDAKI (the leading Malay/Muslim education self-help group linked to the government) from 1994-2003, he urged Malay/Muslim groups (both religious and secular) to cooperate and focus on social problems confronting the community, such as divorce, drug abuse, and poorer educational performance.

110. (U) He was born on August 25, 1944, to a working class Javanese father who emigrated to Singapore as a teenager and an ethnic Chinese mother raised by a Malay father. He graduated from the prestigious Raffles Institution and earned a B.S. in Sociology at the University of Singapore on a government scholarship and a postgraduate diploma in Urban Studies from the University of London using a Commonwealth Scholarship. He spent ten years at the Ministry of National Development as a civil servant and later worked for the Straits Times as a writer and associate news editor. His ethnic Chinese wife is a retired school principal and converted from Catholicism to Islam when they married. They have two children.

Yaacob Ibrahim - Minister of Environment and Water Resources

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111. (U) Yaacob Ibrahim has been Minister of Environment and Water Resources since 2004, following two years as Minister of Community Development and Sports. In 2002, he was appointed Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs. He was first elected to parliament in 1997 and was quickly promoted to the

sub-cabinet position of Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Communications in 1998. In December 2004, he was selected Vice Chairman of the People's Action Party's policy-making Central Executive Committee.

¶12. (C) Since his college days, Yaacob has been very involved in Singapore's Muslim organizations. He was a youth member of the Muslim Missionary Society (Jamiyah) and is a long-time volunteer at MENDAKI (the leading Malay/Muslim education self-help group linked to the government). He was also actively involved with the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), serving on its council from 1992-1996. As Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, he has encouraged community organizations to specialize and avoid duplication of services. He has also been given a role in Singapore's outreach effort to the Middle East. In 2004, he led two business delegations to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Egypt. While in Egypt, he met with Singaporeans studying at Al-Azhar University, as part of the government's efforts to ensure that its citizens studying in the Middle East keep Islamic teachings in a Singapore context. Several contacts have asserted that, since his hajj in February 2004, Yaacob has become less of an integrationist. These contacts said he has come to believe that there were two distinct spheres in Singaporean society: public and private. While he envisioned that Singaporeans of all races would continue to interact in the public sphere in areas of common interest, they could choose to limit their private interactions to people of the same race and religion.

¶13. (U) Dr. Yaacob was born in Singapore on October 3, 1955, the fourth of nine children of a minor civil servant. All of his siblings have excelled as professionals. His eldest brother was the first Malay chosen as a Presidential scholar and a younger sister is political editor for the Straits Times. He graduated from the University of Singapore with a Civil Engineering degree in 1980. He obtained a scholarship to do his Ph.D. at Stanford University. He graduated in 1989 and worked subsequently as a Post-Doctoral Fellow at Cornell University. His wife is an American citizen who grew up in Puerto Rico. Yaacob told emboff that he has a more open-minded interpretation of the Koran and said his wife converted to Islam to satisfy the conservative standards of Singapore. They have two children, both American citizens, and they travel to the U.S. frequently to visit his wife's family.

Zainul Abidin Rasheed - Minister of State, MFA

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¶14. (U) In 2004, Zainul Abidin Rasheed was promoted to Minister of State at MFA; he was previously Senior Parliamentary Secretary from 1998-2001. He was first elected to parliament in 1997. He was active in Malay/Muslim organizations before being recruited by the People's Action Party (PAP) to run for political office. From 1990-1993, he was CEO of MENDAKI (the leading Malay/Muslim education self-help group linked to the government) and was also President of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) from 1991-1996. He is currently Deputy Chairman of the Malay Heritage Foundation. He has urged local Muslims to avoid extremism and conservatism and to think of themselves first as Singaporeans. He does not want concern for Muslims in other countries to cause disunity at home. Friendly and open, Zainul was the highest ranking GOS official at the 2004 Iftar hosted by the Ambassador.

¶15. (U) Zainul was born on March 17, 1948. He attended Raffles Institution and earned a B.A. in Economics and Malay Studies from the University of Singapore in 1971. After graduation, he became a Research Editor/Manager of the Asia Research Bulletin and also served as an editor of the Malay language newspaper, Berita Harian, as well as at the Straits Times. He is married and has four children.

Ahmad Mohamed Magad

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¶16. (U) Ahmad Mohamed Magad was first elected to parliament in 1997 and chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Finance and Trade and Industry. He is one of the few businessmen in parliament. Since 1988, he has been Managing Director of II-VI Singapore Ltd., a subsidiary of a U.S. multinational corporation that manufactures infrared optics. He travels frequently to the U.S. for business and is very accessible to emboffs. He is a member of the Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE), a private-public sector movement to build an entrepreneurial culture in Singapore.

¶17. (C) Before being recruited by the People's Action Party (PAP) for parliament, Magad was co-founder and later chairman of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP). The group was formed in 1991 to provide an alternative voice to MENDAKI (the leading Malay/Muslim education self-help group linked to the government) and to the PAP's Muslim MPs who were seen by some local Muslims as ineffectual and unrepresentative.

Magad stepped down from AMP in 1995 and joined the PAP shortly thereafter. As an MP, Magad supported then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong when he rebuked AMP for attempting to establish an alternative Muslim leadership distinct from the MPs and government-linked organizations. Former Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) President Maurof bin Haji Salleh told emboff that Magad's recruitment by the PAP was an indicator of its desire to weaken independent organizations.

¶18. (U) Born on December 22, 1952, Magad is married and has three children. He won a Public Service Commission scholarship to study precision engineering-optics in West Germany and finished his degree in 1974. He earned an MBA from Brunel University in the UK in 1990 and his Ph.D. in 2003.

Hawazi Daipi

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¶19. (U) Hawazi Daipi was been an MP since 1996. In 2004, he became Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Education as well as for the Ministry of Manpower. He had previously served as Parliamentary Secretary at both ministries.

¶20. (U) A former teacher, Hawazi has stated that education is the key to uplifting Malay/Muslims. He has chaired a number of government committees seeking to improve Malay language instruction and to encourage racial mixing in schools. He has advocated devolving more authority to individual schools to develop initiatives rather than having the Ministry of Education impose measures. While at the National Trades Union Congress, Hawazi was in charge of its program to help retrain the growing number of retrenched workers -- frequently Malay/Muslims -- with limited education and few marketable skills. Hawazi also spent fourteen years as a reporter and editor for the Malay language newspaper Berita Harian. He had a variety of overseas assignments, including Cyprus, southern Philippines, and southern Thailand. He has said that these experiences taught him that social cohesion in a multi-ethnic society is vital but fragile and must be carefully nurtured.

¶21. (U) Hawazi was born on February 13, 1954. He comes from a humble background -- his father was a boat pilot and his mother was a maid and he grew up in what he called an "urban slum," with many families crowded together. He earned a B.A. in economics and geography from the University of Singapore in 1977 and earned a Diploma in Education in 1979 from the Institute of Education. He is married and has two children.

LAVIN